

Nick Hewer

“WHAT ON EARTH ARE JOGGING BOTTOMS?”

With *The Apprentice* final just days away, Jo Usmar caught up with Lord Sugar's right-hand man Nick Hewer to talk facial exercises and Margaret's terrifying left hook...

Portrait by Nicky Johnston

“I'm not wearing a knotted hanky on my head,” Nick Hewer announces with one of his infamous pained grimaces as he examines our seaside-themed photoshoot. “I'm quite laid-back, but Karren [Brady - Nick's fellow *Apprentice* judge] and Alan [Lord Sugar] would *never* let me live that down. And I am nearly 80, after all.” Nick is actually only a sprightly 67 years old, but we're too scared to point this out for fear of incurring a withering Hewer pout, so we whisk the offending hanky away and suggest a wind machine and stuffed seagull as a fair compromise. Nestled into the deckchair (“dreadful things”) Nick begins asking *us* questions while gamely recreating

some of his most famous facial expressions for the camera. “What kind of magazine is *heat*? What's the circulation? How old is your typical reader?” It's like we've bumped into a kindly headmaster who's genuinely interested to know how we're getting on.

“I called your office the other day, but couldn't get through,” he reminds us, peering over his spectacles. “Oh, really?” we say, faking surprise. “How very weird.” Rather than admit that we all thought it was a prank call and ignored it, we quickly launch into our questions...

How do you think this series of *The Apprentice* measures up to the previous ones?

I'm going to be really honest here. When we first started shooting, privately, I - and I don't think I was alone - was concerned it wouldn't be a huge success. The previous series had

BEACHBOY
Why the long feet?



such an extraordinary group of candidates – the Baggs Brigade I call them, after Stuart – and I just wasn't sure we had the same dynamic. How wrong I was.

Did you think it was missing a Baggs? Who, let's remind ourselves, once said, "Everything I touch turns to sold."

What a brilliant character he was. A brat, but brilliant. Now he thinks he's Brad Pitt, for God's sake. I want to tell him that celebrity is a mask that eats into your face, which is a quote from John Updike [Google him] that he should heed... But, anyway, we had Vincent this time around. He's got two loves in his life: one is himself and the other is his hairdresser. He also has a fleeting admiration for the person who applies his fake tan.

Have you ever picked the eventual winner right at the beginning?

Well, it takes me at least two days to work out who everyone is – there's such a lot of them – but then, yes, we always spot them... And we're always wrong. I'll think, "There's someone who's so extraordinarily efficient, brave and good-looking, no one else stands a chance." Then by week three, Mr or Mrs Hero implodes in a puff of smoke.

How much do you tell Lord Sugar about the candidates on the tasks? Do you let rip or just summarise?

He wants to know every single bloody thing. When we brief him, he won't have seen anything and we'll have to know all the answers otherwise he gets out his rolled-up newspaper and beats us up. And then he takes absolutely no notice anyway. I might say, "The blonde chap is a complete space cadet and must be ejected at your soonest convenience," and he'll just grunt. The Boardroom is where he makes his decisions.

Have any candidates ever tried flirting to weasel themselves ahead?

They try, but we don't allow it. Once someone sidled up to Margaret saying how much he admired her fragrance. Well, I don't think he's ever come as near to collecting a left hook before in his life. And people will say, "Ooh Nick, nice tie," and I'll tell them to stop. Our job is to be dispassionate. You can't have favourites.

Speaking of which, who's your favourite to win?

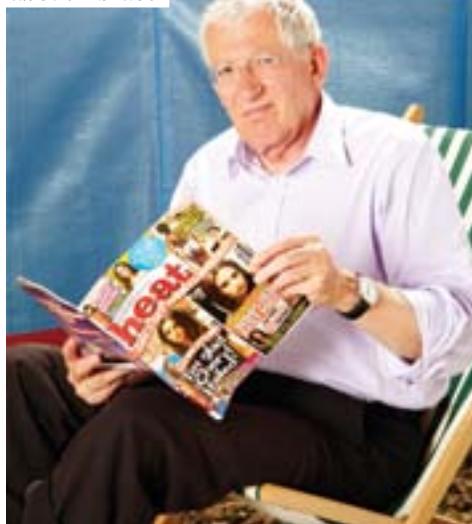
You've got to like who you work with... and I think Tom is a good guy. In the Parisian episode, Melody took over



“I WASN'T AWARE I PULLED SO MANY FACES”

SAD FACE?

Nick's face after he saw our article about his face



and he, because it would have been ungentlemanly to have overridden her, let her have her way. I think he's a fool, but I admire him. There are too few gentlemen in the world. I also like Susan. People are always slagging off "squeaky Susan", but she's 21, taught herself English and is now over here running her own business.

Ahem, what about Jim? We fancy Jim. A little...

Really? He's formidable. You cannot pin him down or dominate him. Even Lord Sugar can't dominate him. I think he's read

a lot of American self-help books and is a bit manipulative.

Loads of the tasks seem to start at stupid hours in the morning...

Well, the production team know what they're doing. You ask why contestants make such tits of themselves? Well, exhaustion leads to mistakes. For last year's sausage task we started at 7pm, went through the night, through the next day and finished at 11pm. It's relentless. Also, they're locked up in that house, that sweaty cauldron, with no contact with their families and are constantly worrying who's creeping up behind them with a bread knife.

That sounds a bit traumatic. Do you still enjoy it?

I hate every minute of it because it's very hard. We put our businesses and our social lives on hold for weeks and weeks and then spend our days eating sandwiches somewhere in a gutter in Hackney. And then we go into the Boardroom

after a 20-hour day with no script and Lord Sugar, who clearly missed his vocation as a criminal barrister, is in charge.

That sounds terrible. You're not going to quit, are you?

No! Not for as long as the show's still going and I'm still physically able. I love it really. We're genuinely helping people achieve the most extraordinary things.

Your range of facial expressions is extraordinary. So extraordinary, that we had a feature on them in the magazine. [We show Nick the feature in issue 634.]

Oh look, so you have. The Tongue In Cheek – that's not an expression, surely? I've just got a mobile face. I wasn't aware I ever pulled such expressions before I saw the show. The cameramen become invisible after a while, so you don't realise you're doing them. I reckon a lot of mine are just to do with bad eyesight.

You've known Lord Sugar for over 20 years. Have you ever been on the receiving end of a Boardroom-style bollocking?

Yes, of course. You'll be out for dinner with him and then he'll ring you at 8am the next morning and give you a bollocking. Even when you don't work for him, you get a bollocking. It's immediately forgotten, though, and the great thing about Alan is he's exceptionally loyal and inspires great loyalty in everyone he works with. He's by far the greatest leader I've ever come across.



NEW LADY
With current *Apprentice* cohort Karren Brady

Nick's chicks



SPECIAL LADY
With his partner Catherine at the National Television Awards

“STUART BAGGS WAS A BRAT”

You've both come up with some classic quips. Do you ever crack up during filming?

Yes, we often roar with laughter off-camera. Most of mine are just old-fashioned, so the new generation don't get them and think they're new. I said Syed [Ahmed from series two] was “all gong and no dinner”, which is from when my mum used to have an actual gong that she'd ring when it was time for dinner. Hmm... I wonder what ever happened to that. One of my kids will have it, no doubt. Little buggers.

Do you get recognised a lot?

When people do stop me they're always very nice. This one time I tripped over getting onto a train and hurt my leg so badly that I thought I'd broken it. It was ten minutes before I realised I was reading my paper upside down. This man passed me and said, “I enjoyed your performance on *The Apprentice* last week, but not half as

much as that little performance just then.” That made me laugh. Margaret used to get really annoyed with the attention, though. **Did she ever get close to unleashing the famous left hook?**

Very nearly. We were in Canary Wharf in London after a long day and two guys, who were obviously pissed, were trying to take our photograph. She lunged at them and shouted, “Give me your camera!” I said, “Let them take your picture otherwise it'll turn into a brawl,” and she said, “You'll protect me, won't you?” I said, “No Margaret, I shall jump into your rather large handbag and hide.”

Do you miss having Margaret on the show?

Ah, this is going to be the Nick Hewer-covering-his-arse-paragraph. In many ways I do, but in many ways I don't and those moments are filled with Karren, who's very good. I think she's got more commercial experience than Margaret, even though she may lack her wit.

Very diplomatic. Karren's like the head girl at school. Can you tell us a secret about her?

Well, it's not about her as such, but it involves her. Alan introduced me to Twitter over Christmas. I was bored and he said it was fun. I discovered there were lots of fake Nick Hewers on there and one of the pages was very pornographic. It was disgusting – listing all the things I allegedly wanted to do to Karren. So I set up my own just to make sure everyone knows that one's fake.

When you're just chilling out, do you throw on some jogging bottoms and a baseball cap?

What on earth are jogging bottoms? I did buy a baseball cap once when I was sailing, which sounds rather grand, but I never wore it. What I'm wearing now is casual, though.

Um, it's a suit, Nick.

It's a travelling suit made of silk, cotton and wool and designed to be very cool. It's got loads of hidden pockets, too, so if you get mugged they won't find anything.

So, we've come to the end of our interview, Nick, and we feel like we've given it 150 per cent. In true Boardroom style, how did we do?

I'm always very suspicious of interviewers who laugh and smile a lot because I know that deep inside their dark brain they're going to dissect you with all the skill of a surgeon with a blunt scalpel... but not in your case, because I think you're probably a very decent young woman. You've covered all the main points and also raised the issue of my mother's missing gong. Good work. ■

The final of The Apprentice is on Sunday 17 July, BBC1 at 9pm



OLD LADY
With his ex-*Apprentice* colleague, the formidable Margaret Mountford